

Chapter 29

The Golden Age of Athens

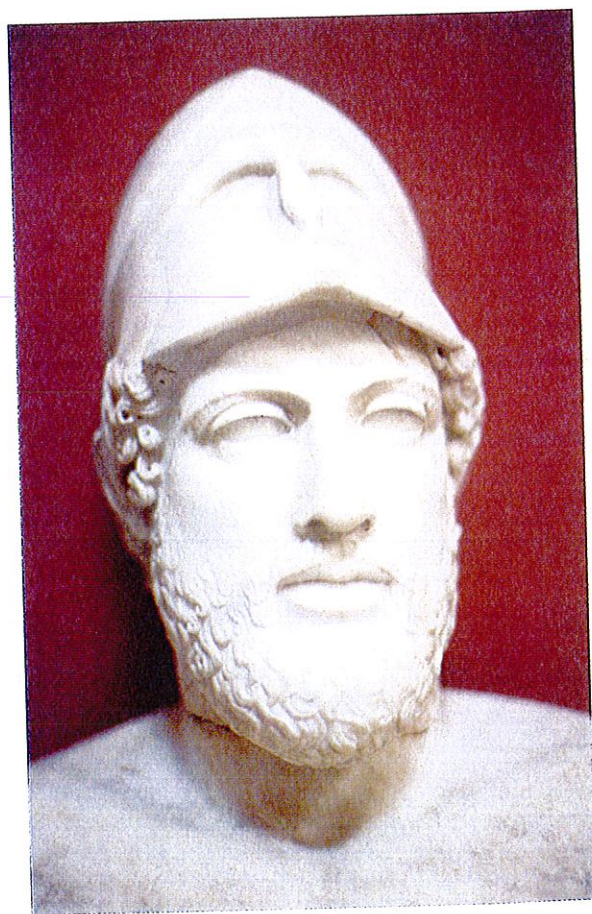
What were the major cultural achievements of Athens?

29.1 Introduction

At the end of the Persian wars, the city of Athens was in ruins. A great Athenian named Pericles (PER-uh-kleez) inspired the people of Athens to rebuild their city. Under his leadership, Athens entered its Golden Age, a period of peace and wealth. Between 479 and 431 B.C.E., Athens was the artistic and cultural center of Greece.

Suppose that you were able to visit Athens during its Golden Age. Passing through the city's gates, you would wind your way through narrow streets to the agora, the public meeting place in the center of the city. The agora is a large square. On two sides you would see magnificent public buildings. The other two sides have covered walkways where you would meet and talk with friends about current issues. In the center of the square are market stalls with a variety of goods for sale, from all over Greece and beyond. Nearby, you would see the acropolis, a high, craggy hill crowned with great temples, rising above the city.

In this chapter, you will explore several important sites in ancient Athens. At each site, you will learn about major cultural achievements accomplished during Athens's Golden Age. You will learn about Greek religion, architecture, sculpture, drama, philosophy, and sports.



This image shows Pericles, a great leader during the Golden Age of Athens.

◀ Note the Greek columns in the ruins of the Parthenon.

Pericles a great leader who developed Athens's culture, democracy, and power during its Golden Age

Parthenon the temple built on the acropolis above Athens, honoring the goddess Athena

acropolis the hill above a Greek city, on which temples were built

29.2 Athens After the Persian Wars

During the Persian wars, the Persians burned Athens to the ground, in 480 B.C.E., after defeating the Greeks in the Battle of Thermopylae. The Greeks eventually defeated the Persians, but the wars left Athens in ruins.

Pericles, Leader of Athens From about 460 to 429 B.C.E., **Pericles** was the leader of Athens's government. One of his chief contributions was to direct the rebuilding of the city. Pericles promoted constructing many public and religious buildings, including the **Parthenon**, the most famous temple in Athens.

Pericles believed that Athens was a model—in culture and in government—for all the Greek city-states. While the leader of Athens, he encouraged creativity in all of the arts, including music and drama. He was a strong supporter of democracy and made **reforms** to encourage its growth. He believed that all citizens had an equal right to participate in government. Under Pericles' leadership, Athens paid the salaries of men who held public office. This enabled poor men, who would otherwise have been unable to afford to leave their jobs and farms, the chance to serve in government positions.

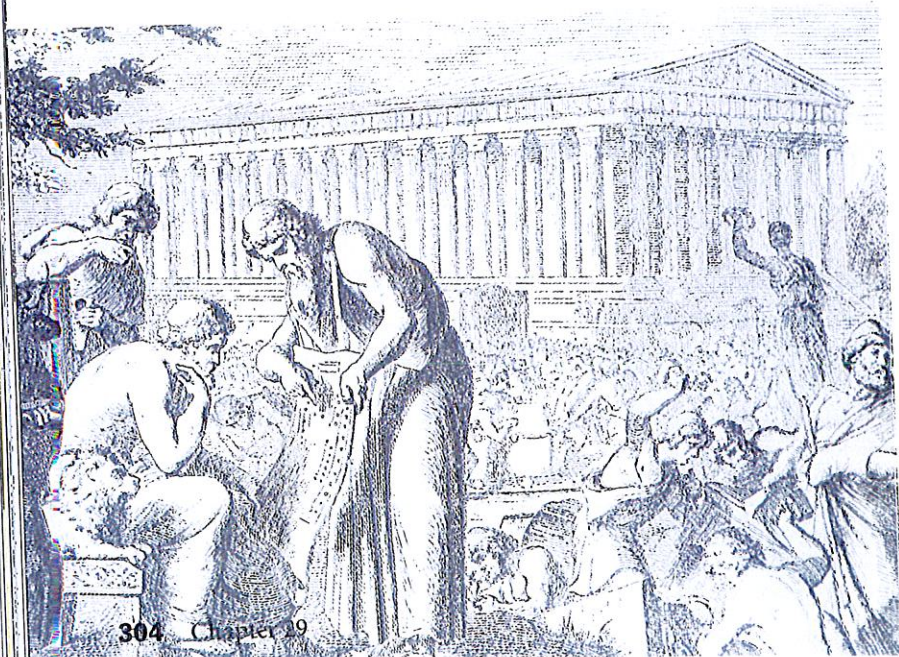
A City of Contrasts Ancient Athens was a city of great contrasts. Many people lived in small, uncomfortable houses that lined narrow streets. Yet the city's public spaces and buildings were large and stately.

Most homes in Athens were one story high and made of mud bricks. The homes of poor families were very simple. The wealthier people had larger houses with rooms built around a central

courtyard. Athenian houses had few windows, so homes were usually lit by oil lamps.

The public spaces and buildings were the pride of Athens. The Athenians built large government buildings around the agora. These buildings were made of stone. On the **acropolis**, the hill above the city, the Athenians built magnificent temples as earthly homes for their gods and goddesses.

In this engraving, Pericles, seated, reviews building plans for the Parthenon, under construction in the background.



Olympian Gods and Goddesses

Zeus Ruler of the gods

Hera Wife of Zeus; goddess of marriage

Poseidon Brother of Zeus; god of the sea

Hestia Sister of Zeus; goddess of the hearth (the family fire)

Demeter Sister of Zeus; goddess of agriculture

Ares Son of Zeus; god of war

Athena Daughter of Zeus; goddess of wisdom and war

Apollo Son of Zeus; god of the sun, poetry, and music

Artemis Daughter of Zeus; goddess of the moon and the hunt

Hephaestus Son of Zeus; god of fire and metalworkers

Aphrodite Daughter of Zeus; goddess of love and beauty

Hermes Son of Zeus; messenger of the gods and god of travel



This Parthenon frieze shows Poseidon, Apollo, and Artemis.

29.3 Greek Religion

The ancient Greeks thought that the gods and goddesses they worshipped looked and often acted like humans, but did not age and die. Every city-state honored a god or goddess, who was thought to give its people special protection. For example, Athens was named for the goddess Athena.

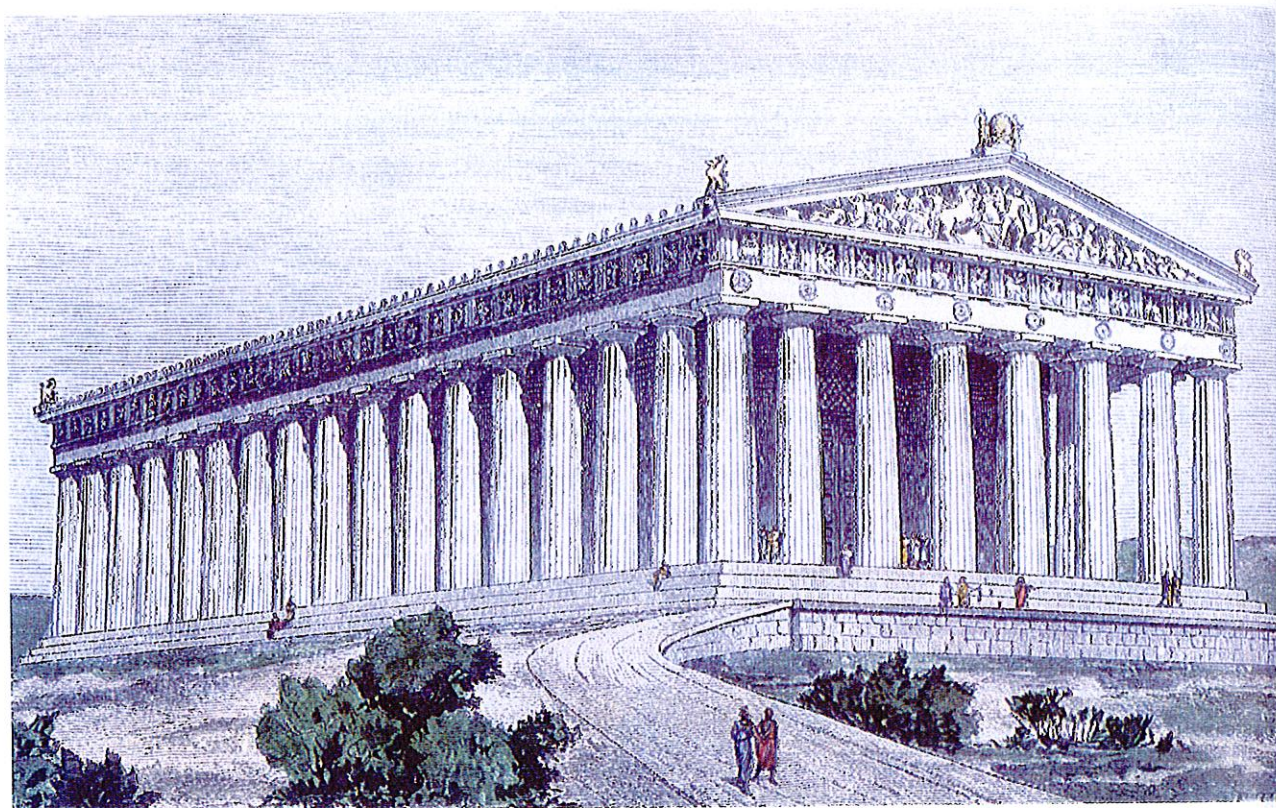
The Greeks believed that each god or goddess had power over a particular area of life. Athena was the goddess of war and wisdom. The Greeks placed a colossal (huge) statue of her inside the Parthenon, the temple they built in her honor.

Another famous temple was in the city of Delphi. This temple was **dedicated** to the god Apollo. People would visit the temple to ask Apollo for advice. A priestess, called the oracle of Delphi, would answer their questions by going into a trance. The words spoken by the priestess were thought to come from Apollo.

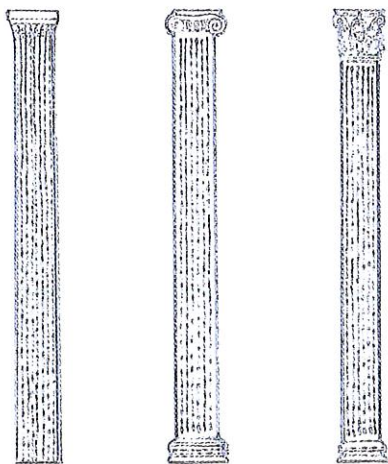
The Greeks told **myths**, or stories, about the gods. According to these stories, the home of the gods was Mount Olympus, a real mountain in Greece. Twelve of the gods and goddesses were particularly important. They are often called the Olympian gods.

The Olympian gods and goddesses were part of everyday life in ancient Greece. For example, before setting out on journeys by land or sea, the Greeks would ask them for help. The Greeks dedicated their festivals and sporting events to their deities. Greek artists decorated the temples with images of them.

myth a traditional story that helps explain a culture's beliefs



Features of Greek architecture seen in the Parthenon above include pediments, friezes, and three kinds of columns. Below, from left to right, are Doric columns, Ionic columns with scrolled tops, and decorative Corinthian columns.



29.4 Greek Architecture

Temples are good examples of the Greeks' talent for architecture. The Greeks built their temples, not as places in which to worship, but as beautiful dwelling places for the gods and goddesses. Religious ceremonies were conducted outside.

The temples show the importance of balance and order in the Greeks' idea of beauty. Temples were built with rows of tall **columns**. The Greeks used three styles of columns. The Doric column was the simplest. It had no base and got slimmer toward the top. The Ionic column was thinner. It sat on a base and had scrolls carved into the top. The Corinthian column was the most complex, with carvings that looked like leaves at the top.

Athenians built three temples on the acropolis to honor Athena. As you have read, one of these was the Parthenon. One of the most beautiful temples in ancient Greece, the Parthenon was built on a long rectangular platform. There were 8 columns across both the front and the back, and 17 along each side. The roof was slanted, creating triangles, called pediments, at the front and back of the building. Above the columns was a band of sculptures called a frieze (freez). The sculptures themselves are called metopes (MEH-tuh-pees).

There were many different sizes of Greek temples, but their basic shape was similar. Most had a main room with a statue of the temple's god or goddess. The Parthenon, for example, had a magnificent statue of Athena that stood 30 feet high. Made of wood, the statue was covered with ivory to make it more lifelike. Then it was dressed in clothes and decorated with gold. Like the temple itself, the statue expressed both the Greeks' love of beauty and their awe of the gods.

29.5 Greek Sculpture

The statue of Athena in the Parthenon was a wonderful example of another important Greek art: sculpture. Sculptors in Athens often set up a workshop near the site where the finished statue would be placed. Sculptor apprentices first made a life-size clay model supported by wooden or metal frames. The general outline of the statue was then roughed out in marble. A master sculptor added details and finishing touches.

Greek statues were colorful. Metalworkers attached appropriate bronze pieces to the statue, like spears and shields. Painters applied wax and bright colors to a statue's hair, lips, clothes, and headdress.

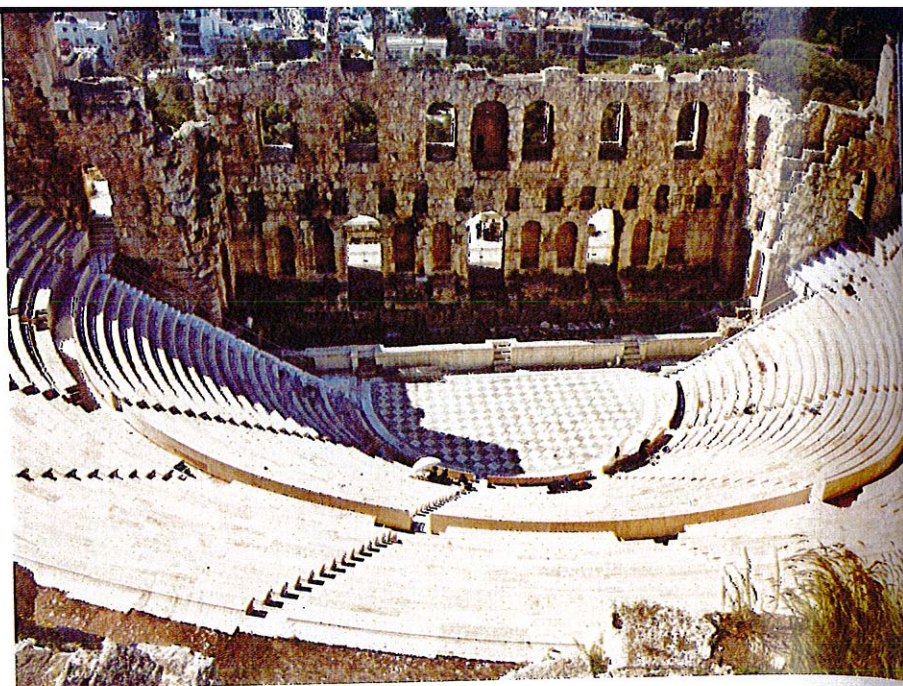
Creating lifelike statues was one of the great achievements of Greek sculptors. The earliest Greek statues had been influenced by Egyptian styles. Like the Egyptians, the Greeks created larger-than-life figures that faced front, with their arms held stiffly at their sides. Later Greek sculptors made more realistic statues in natural poses, showing muscles, hair, and clothing in much greater detail.

One of the most famous Athenian sculptors was a man named Phidias (FIH-dee-uhs). He designed the figures that line the frieze on the Parthenon. He also sculpted the statue of Athena that stood inside the temple. The statue carried a shield of gold, with carvings of two faces—those of the great Athenian leader Pericles and of Phidias himself.



The sculptor Phidias created the huge statue of Athena that stood inside the Parthenon. Above is a replica completed in 1990 by an American artist.

The ruins of the Theater of Dionysus are still visible in Athens. Built in the mid-300s B.C.E., it could hold as many as 17,000 spectators.



drama the art of writing, acting in, and producing plays

29.6 Greek Drama

In addition to architecture and sculpture, the ancient Greeks excelled in **drama**, the art of the theater. Going to the theater was a regular part of Athenian life. The Theater of Dionysus (dy-uh-NIE-suhs), in Athens, could hold thousands of people.

Dionysus was the god of merriment. Greek plays grew out of the songs and dances that the Greeks performed at harvest time to honor him. As Greek playwrights developed their art, they began to write plays that told stories. The plays included a few main characters and a chorus. The chorus was a group of men who recited lines that commented on the actions of the main characters. The words spoken by the chorus helped explain and expand on the story.

There were no women actors in ancient Greece. Men played all the characters, both male and female. That was one reason actors wore masks. The masks also showed the audience whether a character was happy or sad.

Plays were staged in open-air theaters built into the sides of hills. A Greek theater was shaped like a bowl so that everyone could hear what was said. The seats rose in a semicircle around a stage at the bottom of the bowl. Scenery was painted on canvas and hung behind the actors.

Plays were often a form of competition that could last for days. Judges chose winners in four categories: tragic playwright, comic playwright, leading tragic actor, and leading comic actor. The winning writers and actors were crowned with olive leaves and given prizes such as figs.

29.7 Greek Philosophy

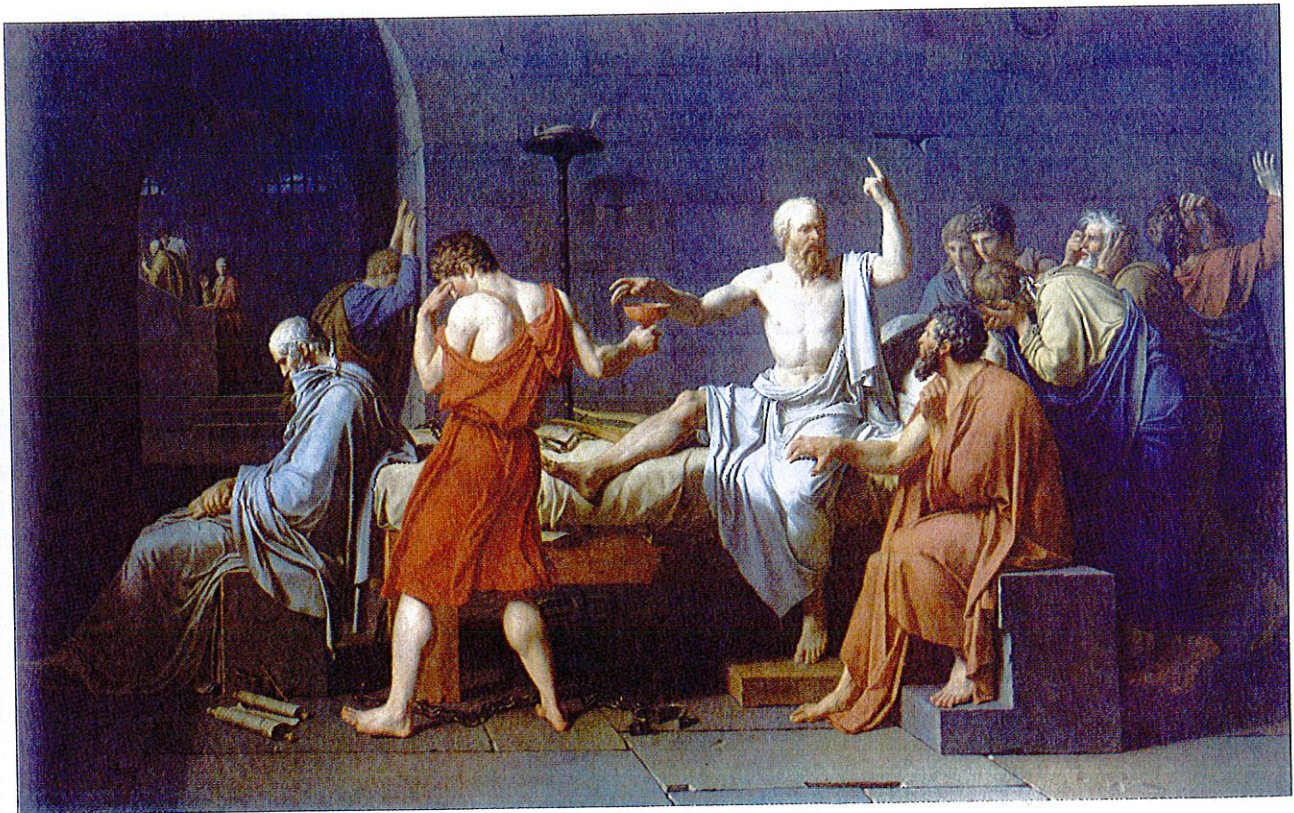
Athenians, like other Greeks, loved to talk and argue. In the sheltered spaces to one side of the agora, men often gathered to discuss the world around them. They talked about nature, often trading ideas about the natural world, such as what it was made of and how it worked. They also talked about things they couldn't see, such as the meaning of life, justice, truth, and beauty. This kind of thinking is called philosophy, which means "the love of wisdom."

One of the greatest philosophers in Athens was a man named **Socrates** (SAH-kruh-teez). Socrates encouraged people to question the very things they thought they knew. He taught others by asking them such questions as, *What makes a good life? What is truth? How do you know?* In this way he led his students to think about their beliefs.

Even in Athens, where people loved new ideas, this constant questioning got Socrates into trouble. His enemies accused him of not honoring the gods and of leading young people into error and disloyalty. In 399 B.C.E., Socrates was brought to trial for these crimes. In defending himself, Socrates said that he was the wisest man in Greece because he recognized how little he knew.

Socrates a great ancient Greek philosopher who taught by asking his students thought-provoking questions

Socrates calmly drank poison after being sentenced to death by an Athenian jury.



The jury found Socrates guilty and sentenced him to death. Friends encouraged him to escape from Athens, but Socrates insisted on honoring the law. He died by drinking hemlock, the juice of a poisonous plant.

The example of Socrates inspired many other important Greek thinkers, especially his student Plato (PLAY-toh). In turn, Plato taught the great philosopher, Aristotle (ar-uh-STOT-uhl).

Panathenaic Games athletic events, including horse races and chariot races, held as part of the festival called Panathenaea, honoring the goddess Athena

29.8 Greek Sports

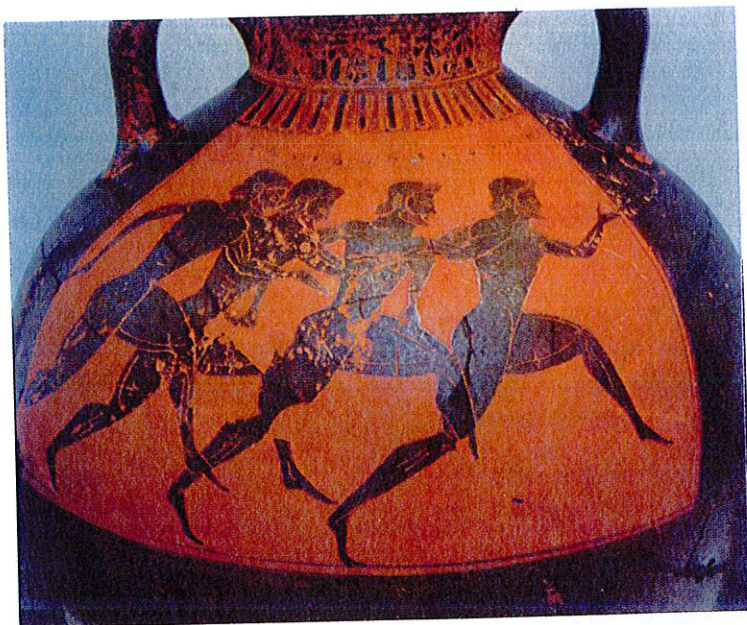
The Greeks' interest in philosophy shows how much they valued the mind. Their love of many kinds of sports shows that they also prized physical fitness.

The Greeks often held athletic events to honor their gods and goddesses. In Athens, games were held as part of a festival called the Panathenaea (pan-ath-uh-NEE-uh), which honored the goddess Athena. The high point of the festival was the procession, or solemn parade. The Athenians attached a new robe, as a gift for the statue of Athena, to the mast of a ship and pulled it through the city to the temple.

The **Panathenaic Games** included many events. There were horse races and chariot races, including one event in which men jumped on and off a moving chariot. Men also competed in foot races. In one race, men ran in their armor.

The games also included combat sports, such as boxing and wrestling. In an event called the *pancratium*, men were allowed to punch, kick, and even choke each other. The event ended when one fighter surrendered, lost consciousness, or died.

Another set of games, to honor the god Zeus, was played every four years at Olympia. Called the Olympics, these games were so important to the Greeks that they would call a truce from all wars so athletes could travel safely to the games.



A piece of pottery like this may have been awarded to the winner of a footrace at the Panathenaic Games.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you explored major achievements in ancient Greek culture during the Golden Age of Athens.

Athens After the Persian Wars Pericles was a great leader who promoted both the rebuilding of Athens and the growth of Greek culture and democracy.

Greek Religion The Greek worship of gods and goddesses was part of everyday life. Athens was named for the goddess Athena. The Parthenon honored her. The temple at Delphi honored the god Apollo. The Greeks told myths, or stories, about their many gods.

Greek Architecture and Sculpture The temples on the acropolis in Athens were examples of the Greek talent for architecture. The lifelike marble statues made in workshops displayed the art of sculpture.

Greek Drama and Philosophy Athenians enjoyed dramas staged in large open-air theaters. Only male actors performed. The Greeks also enjoyed discussing philosophy. Socrates was one of the greatest philosophers in Athens.

Greek Sports The Greeks competed in athletic events at the Panathenaic Games and the Olympics. Events included races and combat sports.



This present-day photograph shows the ruins of the Parthenon as they stand today, at the top of the acropolis in Athens.